DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 500 FL 027 261

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TITLE Task-Sequencing in L2 Acquisition.
INSTITUTION Texas Univ., Austin. Foreign Language Education Program.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Texas Foreign Language Education Conference (Austin, TX, March 23-24, 2001). For the complete journal issue, see FL 027 255.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT Texas Papers in Foreign Language Education; v6 n1 p101-112 Fall 2001
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication; *Second Language Learning; *Task Analysis; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Task Sequence

ABSTRACT

The meaning versus form (or fluency versus accuracy) debate is no longer a discriminating factor among teaching approaches because meaning and form are assumed to be essential for learning. A successful pedagogical task accomplishes two things: (1) focuses students' attention on the structure of the language by demonstrating that language form contributes to meaning; and (2) motivates learners to heighten the complexity of the linguistic means they use to accomplish task objectives. This paper argues that a successful task sequence leads learners to communicate with limited resources; become aware of apparent limitations in their knowledge about linguistic structures that are necessary to convey the message appropriately and accurately; and look for alternatives to overcome such limitations. The paper analyzes the above-mentioned theoretical claim with a description of teaching and learning tasks across four dimensions represented by the "four eyes": involvement, inquiry, induction, and incorporation. (Contains 28 references and 3 tables.) (Author/SM)

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ED 464 500

Task-sequencing in L2 Acquisition

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The meaning versus form (or fluency versus accuracy) debate is no longer a discriminating factor among teaching approaches because meaning and form are assumed to be essential for learning (e.g., Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). A successful pedagogical task: (a) focuses students' attention on the structure of the language by demonstrating that language form contributes to meaning, and (b) motivates learners to heighten the complexity of the linguistic means they use to accomplish task objectives. In the present paper I argue that a successful task sequence leads learners to: (a) communicate with limited resources, (b) become aware of apparent limitations in their knowledge about linguistic structures that are necessary to convey the message appropriately and accurately, and finally, (c) look for alternatives to overcome such limitations. I will analyze the above-mentioned theoretical claim with a description of teaching and learning tasks across four dimensions represented by the "four eyes": involvement, inquiry, induction and incorporation.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent descriptions of task-based instruction incorporate a focus on language form in order to overcome the deficiencies of models that devote exclusive attention to language content (e.g., Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998). In this respect, task-based approaches face two major theoretical challenges: the sequencing of task difficulty and the sequencing of target linguistic structures within the context of a communicative syllabus. Several recent task-based proposals comment extensively on the sequencing of tasks according to methodological considerations related to task implementation: degrees of negotiation of meaning, difficulty, planning, etc. (e.g., Johnson, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). On the other hand, the incorporation of developmental sequences of the language system has been addressed in a more circuitous way. For instance, to avoid the explicit identification and sequencing of linguistic factors Skehan advocates two principles of task design: target a range of structures instead of a single one and use the criterion of utility of use of the target structures instead of the criterion of necessity (but see Pienemann, 1985 for problems with the former and Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993 for problems with the latter). In this paper I will describe the pedagogical implementation of tasks that focus on a particular grammatical feature: Spanish past tense verbal morphology. The choice of inflectional morphology as a case study is useful because the use of past tense verbal endings incorporates a wide range of levels of linguistic analysis (i.e., morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse). Furthermore, there is now a substantial amount of theoretical analysis and empirical evidence that provides us with reasonable assumptions for the creation

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of pedagogical tasks that take into account possible stages of development that can be incorporated into a task-based pedagogical program (see Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Salaberry, 2000).

A Task-based Syllabus

There are various definitions that focus on the different components that make up a task. Among the earliest conceptualizations, Long (1985) foresaw the relevance of communicative demands and claimed that a task is "... a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward ... by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (p. 89). Long's definition is, however, quite general and does not directly address the particular constraints of classroom-based interactions (i.e., What are the rewards of language practice? Who determines the goal of in-class language use?). Nunan (1989) acknowledges the special nature of classroom-based interaction defining a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 59).

It is important to mention, however, that tasks are not devoid of socially-dependent structural constraints that can be assessed when language is visualized as a contextualized human artifact. Hence, Swales (1990) points out that tasks need to be visualized as "...sequenceable goal-directed activities...relatable to the acquisition of pre-genre and genre skills appropriate to a foreseen or emerging sociorhetorical situation" (p. 76). Finally, Skehan (1998) underlines the importance of the implementation phase of a learning task. Skehan points out that there should be a clear set of criteria to assess the outcomes of task requirements in a classroom task "...task completion has some priority; the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome...etc." (p. 95). In sum, a task is a socially constrained pedagogical activity that is measured in terms of a communicative outcome. As such, the implementation of the activity focuses students' attention on meaning first, but allows for the incidental shift of attention to the manipulation of linguistic form as needed. The latter will be the focus of attention of this paper.

Sequencing: The Planned-Contingent Paradox

As early as 1985, Long made a cogent case for the use of tasks in second language learning. Long claimed that a task can be successfully used as the basic unit that makes up a course syllabus intended for classroom teaching. For that purpose, Long considered for his analysis a classification of syllabi into two superordinate categories: a synthetic syllabus represented by the gradual accumulation of parts of a whole, and an analytic syllabus organized in terms of purposes without linguistic interference or control. Synthetic syllabi were archetypally instantiated in the teaching methods of the 60s and 70s: grammar

translation, audiolingualism, total physical response (TPR), the Silent Way, etc. These types of programs provide what Long defines as a focus on formS (as opposed to a focus on form: see below). As for the analytic syllabus, Long divided it into two sub-categories. The first type provides a strong focus on meaning, as is the case of the popular communicative-based approaches of the 80s (e.g. Krashen and Terrell's natural approach, and various types of immersion programs). The second type, while still emphasizing an overall communicative approach provides, in contrast, an explicit focus on form. By definition, a focus on form is contingent upon structural demands of the communicative situation as opposed to a syllabus that has a pre-determined focus on a range of linguistic formS (forms that may or may not be immediately necessary to accomplish a communicative event). Possible instantiations of an analytic syllabus with a focus on form are what can be vaguely defined as task-based programs (including the more radical process syllabus in which students make up the syllabus along with the instructor).

In principle, the contingent nature of a focus on form does not allow for the planning or sequencing of presentation and/or practice of specific linguistic structures. Johnson (1996), however, analyzed several alternatives for the sequencing of grammatical structures. For the purpose of this paper I will analyze a modified version of Johnson's paradigm that results in three types of possible syllabi (as opposed to the five types presented by Johnson). The following diagram presents a schematic view of the sequential focus of attention on various aspects of the target language. As I understand it, Johnson equates the focus on a particular linguistic structure as a part of the whole linguistic system.

A. part-1 → whole → part-2 → whole → part-3 → whole → ...
B. whole → part-1 → whole → part-2 → whole → part-3 →
C. whole → part-3 → part-2 → whole → part-3 →whole → whole[1]

The first sequencing type (A) is representative of a focus on formS approach: target items (part-1, part-2, etc.) are selected, isolated and sequenced in a pre-established manner. That is, these target language forms are presented, analyzed, and practiced before they are functionally needed in a contextualized communicative situation. One of the principal tenets of this approach to sequencing is that learners supposedly will be able to master and control specific items of the target language before their use in context is required. Hence, errors may, in principle, be avoided.[2] The sequences represented in (B) and (C) constitute possible models of task-based instruction (according to the definition

[1] Notice that part -1 is not listed given that it is a possibility because there is no sequentiality to the process of focusing on target grammatical items.

[2] It is questionable, however, that learners will be able to avoid natural developmental errors as soon as the constraints on language production are removed and students try to use the language as a whole. This is a common phenomenon represented in teachers' frustrations when students seem to control one form as soon as it is presented but forget (how) to use them immediately after.

given above). Both models are based on the use of language as a means to an end (accomplishment of a communicative task). The second type (B) is representative of an approach that focuses on meaning as a whole first. The focus on the grammatical item comes afterwards, but the selection of the specific grammatical components may be arbitrary as is the case of the sequence described above in (A). The last type of syllabus (C) differs from (B) in that the focus on form may happen at any given point in time during the learning process. In principle, this entails that either the learner or the instructor decides when to focus on form and on what items to focus. Table 1 presents a summary of the main features of each pedagogical sequence.

Table 1 Features of each pedagogical sequence

Sequence	Syllabus content	Syllabus type	focus on
A	Grammatical	pre-planned	formS
B	task-based	pre-planned	form(S)
C	task-based	interactive	form

As we can see, the main difference between the second and third sequence is that the former can be equated with a (pre-)planned syllabus and the latter with an interactive one based on learners' needs and demands. It could be argued that type (C) is more conducive to a focus on form, although this may be a matter of degree. In essence, these two sequences underline the importance of two crucial components of a complete pedagogical approach to second language teaching (Richards & Lockart, 1996). In more concrete terms, we can say that sequence (B) is represented in textbooks where we find a pre-determined order (by nature of the constraints that textbook authors face), whereas sequence (C) is represented by the locally-based decisions based on the interactions between instructor and students on a day-to-day basis.

It is important to mention a relevant caveat about the concept of a focus on form: the term task, as defined as a meaningful activity, may be ambiguous. Skehan (1998) argues that "... the two underlying characteristics of tasks, avoidance of specific structures and engagement of worthwhile meanings, are matters of degree, rather than being categorical" (p. 96). One reason for this is obvious: learners and teachers may not be interested or focused on the same features of the target language. Moreover, it is fair to say that not all students would be traversing the same developmental stage at the same time. Long & Robinson (1998) point out that "... [the] teachers' intended pedagogical focus and students' actual attentional focus often differ substantially" (p. 24). To make matters more complex, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) argue that pedagogical "help should ... be offered only when it is needed, and withdrawn as soon as the novice shows signs of control and ability to function independently" (p. 468). The latter proposal embodies a learner-centered approach to language learning with the obvious corollary, as I understand it, that the analysis of language form itself

may be established as the goal of any specific pedagogical task. That is to say, we may reverse the order of analysis normally attributed to the canonical definition of a task: a focus on meaning first followed up by a focus on form may become a sequence in which the focus on form appears first. In other words, three major components define a focus on form of a task-based approach: (a) it can be generated by the teacher or the learner(s), (b) it is generally incidental (occasional shift of attention) and, (c) it is contingent on learners' needs (triggered by perceived problems)(see Long, 1991).

The Communication-Learning Paradox

The apparently amorphous nature of a focus on meaning or a focus on form raises an important issue that needs to be addressed by any pedagogical approach that intends to make a connection between these two components. Indeed, beginning with Krashen and Terrell several researchers have described in different ways what amounts to be a paradox of second language learning: the communication-learning paradox. Klein's (1986) depiction of the problem is very compelling:

> In some respects, communication and learning are at variance...communication is based on a set of stable rules which the learner, as speaker and listener, can follow. As a learner, however, he must not consider the rules he is following at the time to be stable: he must be prepared to control, to revise and even to drop them. (p. 147)

The studies from the European Science Foundation (e.g., Dietrich, Klein & Noyau, 1995; Klein & Purdue, 1992) in particular, provide a wealth of evidence from a variety of languages to substantiate the existence of this paradox with respect to the development of verbal endings. Most of these studies point to the incomplete nature of the L2 systems of many so-called natural learners. These learners can function in their normal interaction in the target language but, for some reason or another, do not strive to make their language conform to the norms of the L2 (at least not to the extent that native speakers do). Under the assumption that what focuses these "natural" learners on the manipulation of language is a functional-communicative objective; it may not be necessary, after all, to make the L2 system more complex or more accurate as long as one has access to a system with which one can efficiently achieve concrete communicative objectives in the target language.

For the above-mentioned reason, it has been claimed that the implementation of pedagogical tasks should be based on constraints inherent to a communicative interaction that affect noticing (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). This is one area in which academic environments may excel over natural environments

as a focus on form may not be readily available in the natural environment.[3] Long and Robinson (1998) claim that a "... focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features--by the teacher and/or one or more students--triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production" (p. 23). There are, to be sure, several factors that have been claimed to have an effect on the process of learning, especially during the stage when the learner seizes upon one particular feature of the target language heretofore unnoticed. For instance, Schmidt (1990) lists the following factors: (a) task demands, (b) frequency, (c) saliency of the feature, (d) individual skills and strategies, and (e) expectations created by the native language (see also Harley, 1989). Skehan (1998) classifies these factors into several categories: (a) input qualities (frequency & saliency), (b) focused input (instruction, selective tasks), (c) task demands on processing resources, and (d) internal factors (readiness, individual differences). I have reassessed the effect of the above-mentioned factors from the point of view of the interaction between teachers and learners (see Table 2).

Table 2 Factors that affect noticing: a reassessment

Roles & Data	**Factors**
(a) Teacher	(1) Explicit instruction
	(2) Task demands
	(3) Register-Format (e.g., spoken/written)
(b) Learner	(1) Learner's goals/objectives
	(2) Stage of development
	(3) Processing style/ Processing strategy
(c1) Language features	(1) Frequency
	(2) Saliency (semantic/perceptual)
(c2) Language structure	(1) Vocabulary
	(2) Phonology/Phonetics
	(3) Morphosyntax
	(4) Discourse
	(5) Pragmatics/speech acts
	(6) Sociolinguistics

Table 2 classifies the different factors that have an effect on noticing according to the effect that the interactants (i.e., teacher and learner) and the language data have on the process of language acquisition. The subcategory language structure refers to specific components of the language that teacher and learner will focus on at any given point in time. The subcategory language features refers to the characteristics that make certain pieces of language easier to

[3] Of course, this contrast is categorical and does not take into account a middle ground in which the positive features of each environment are combined. But, as we discussed above, that is the goal of a task-based approach as defined in the first section of this paper.

process. The relationship of the two players and the data is depicted in graphical format in Figure 1.[4]

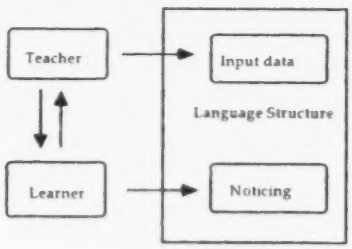

Figure 1 An *instructor's view* of the L2 pedagogical framework

By definition, the teacher has the prerogative of selecting and manipulating the so-called "input data" along the lines of the factors identified in Table 1. That is to say, the teacher has the option of selecting a theme, the form of presentation of a selected piece (e.g., oral versus written), the length of the piece, the task objectives (e.g., identify ideas, summarize), etc. To some extent then, the instructor may control the focus of attention of the learner through the manipulation of various task constraints and task objectives that are measured by task outcomes (see Skehan, 1998). The teacher does not, however, have the ability to directly control what the learner notices because there are other factors that are internal to the learner that are not amenable to such direct manipulation. For that reason Figure 1 depicts noticing and input data as two separate boxes, that can, nevertheless be connected. Thus, this particular framework places a lot of emphasis on language acquisition as a collaborative process that neither teachers nor textbook writers can directly control.

Task Sequencing: Four Eyes are Better than Two

In sum, the pedagogical framework of a communicatively-oriented task-based syllabus with a focus on form requires that communication requirements be established first. This framework enables teachers to lead learners to: (a) communicate with limited resources, (b) become aware of apparent limitations in their knowledge about linguistic structures that are necessary to convey the message appropriately and accurately, and (c) look for alternatives to overcome such limitations. This sequence focuses students' attention on the structure of the language by demonstrating that each component of language as a whole contributes to the meaning that makes up any type of interaction. This sequence

[4] Figure 1 is not intended to be a comprehensive representation of the L2 acquisition process, but rather a very schematic view of the possibilities afforded by the interaction between learners, teacher and the data they have access to.

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may also increase the chances that learners will attempt to heighten the complexity of the linguistic means by which they communicate because it focuses them on the natural/meaningful relationship between communicative tasks and grammar analysis.

This pedagogical sequence may be implemented in four stages represented by the "four eyes" (for mnemonic retrieval): Involvement, Inquiry, Induction and Incorporation. This sequence is based on the concept of the three Is (Illustration, Interaction, and Induction) proposed by McCarthy (1998) to replace the traditional pedagogical model based on the three Ps (Presentation, Practice and Production). In the proposed revision I include a preliminary stage (in keeping with the promotion of a student-centered approach) that highlights the need for students to become stakeholders in the learning process (involvement). The second stage (inquiry) underlines further the importance of analysis of language form from the student's point of view within the context of a communicative environment. It is important to underline, however, that inquiry can be promoted with activities that require outright language production (see Salaberry, 1997). Induction is similar to what McCarthy proposes and is here defined as the development of hypotheses about the structure and functions of the target language. Finally, incorporation calls for the assimilation of knowledge about the new language features in a manner productive to the overall L2 system. I additionally propose that this framework for learners be correlated to a set of processes for teachers, given that an academic environment, by definition, relies on a guided process where an expert guides a novice. The correlation of stages that corresponds to teachers and students is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3 Four stages represented by the "four eyes"

Teacher		Learner
1. Introduction of topic	← →	1. Involvement
2. Illustration	← →	2. Inquiry
3. Implementation	← →	3. Induction
4. Integration	← →	4. Incorporation

Thus, learners first develop the motivation to participate in a task (involvement). Part of this involvement is generated by the teacher's introduction to the topic. Then, teachers illustrate particular features of the target language in context, thereby helping learners focus on relevant components of the language (inquiry). It should be pointed out, however, that inquiry as a process will, in most cases, be initiated by the students (again I emphasize the learner-centered perspective). Later a process of induction follows until knowledge of newly acquired features of the language are actively incorporated to the rest of the evolving L2 system. Teachers accompany the last two stages of the process in an active manner (implementation of necessary activities, integration of selected

features to the overall linguistic system). This process will be exemplified in the next section with a task intended to focus on the discursive nature of past tense morphology in Spanish. The design of the tasks to be described is based on findings from two major areas of research: (a) the role of discursive factors (foreground versus background) and verb types (lexical aspect) (e.g., Andersen & Shirai, 1996; Dietrich et al., 1995; Salaberry, 2000), and (b) the effect of learning setting (e.g., Buczsowska & Weist, 1991; Pienemann, 1985).

An Example: Movie and Personal Narratives

The selected topic that provides the thematic framework for this task is the one of movie and personal narratives. These narratives differ, crucially, in the use of present and past tense. Thus, they constitute an ideal "carrier" for learners to develop hypotheses about the discursive and contextualized use of present versus past endings. During the first stage the implementation of activities is intended to (re)activate background knowledge and schemas about the social activity represented in the general theme (involvement). For this particular topic, the task may require students to rate various movie reviews written by movie critics on a scale from the most positive to the most negative. A focus on language form is by and large avoided to encourage learners to focus their attention on meaning as, after all, the objective is to reactivate thematic background knowledge. For instance, the task may be designed so that students understand the opinion of the movie critic through an efficient use of selected salient linguistic cues such as the authors' selection of adjectives, information in the title of the review, content of opening and concluding paragraphs only. In general, at this stage the instructor remains unconcerned about linguistic accuracy as long as the overall communicative "transaction" is accomplished.[5]

The second stage in the process focuses the learner on producing a movie narrative (inquiry). This type of narrative event is normally recounted in present tense (e.g., Fleischmann, 1991; Klein, 1994); thus, it justifies the functional use of present instead of past tense. For this step, one may, for instance, read the movie narrative and ask students to identify the events that make up the plot of the story (in the form of infinitives). Later on, students may be asked to separate the main events of the story from the ones that represent accessory information (i.e., recognition of foreground-background events). Immediately after, students may be asked to reconstruct the story in writing with the information they have available. Some of the lexical information used at this stage may eventually be recycled in the narrative presented in the subsequent stage. The focus here is on building lexical knowledge through a reactivation of a variety of verbal predicates presented in a linguistic form already familiar to students.

During the third stage, learners are introduced to a personal narrative. The latter, in contrast with the movie narrative, is normally recounted in past

[5] Again, the above mentioned activities may require production of language from the beginning.

tense (e.g., Blyth, 1997; Fleischmann, 1991; Klein, 1994). Thus, it justifies the functional use of past as opposed to present tense. For this stage, learners may be asked to complete a listening comprehension task that requires them to place the pictures that depict the main or foreground events of the movie plot in the right order. Soon after, the students listen to the tape again to take note of as many plot events as they can write down (while the tape is being played) to be able to reconstruct the plot sequence in its entirety (along with background events). The latter is a modified version of the dictogloss technique (Wajnrib, 1990) that is ideal to introduce students to the third stage: induction. It is crucial to note that at this stage learners are being asked to produce a narrative in the target language before having been exposed to a teacher-led explanation on the formal features of past tense verbal endings (the first P in the traditional PPP syllabus). To ensure proper completion of this task, various verb types used in the narratives presented in the previous step in their present tense form may now be presented in their past tense form (reliance on the lexical base previously developed). Additionally, the task outcome requires students to focus on a meaningful objective to make sure all events are accounted for. A focus on form is, nevertheless, a contingent aspect of this process that may be addressed as needed. What we will not encounter within this framework is a direct explanation of past tense endings (at least not yet). During the debriefing stage students may be given the actual script that was read to them so that they can compare it to their transcription. The latter step is crucial in the process as it ensures that the hypotheses about language form entertained by the students may now be verified, validated, modified, or rejected against the data from the transcript. At this stage the learner is in control of the learning process (a learner-centered approach).

During the fourth and last stage, students are asked to produce their own movie scripts (incorporation). For instance, they can be asked to write a dialogue for a series of (scrambled) pictures that recount a possible witness account of an event parallel to the one described in the movie plot from the previous step. Whatever the theme of the scene, the goal is for the students to reconstruct the scene and act it out (i.e., learners are encouraged to maintain a communicative focus by requiring a concrete task outcome). The expected outcome of the improvised play can be measured against several possible variables (e.g., originality, acting, etc.). This last step requires more language production that allows for another round of hypothesis testing (or hypothesis confirmation).

Conclusion

In the previous sections I summarized the basic tenets of a task-based pedagogical approach, and I have also provided a rather sketchy description of a pedagogical activity that attempts to be an implementation of a task-based sequence that describes the "four eyes" for experts and novices (teachers and learners). The activity described also incorporates some of the findings that are

apparent from recent research on the development of past tense verbal endings. In this activity, linguistic structures that are not yet part of the learners' competence are first highlighted in communicative tasks, thereby providing students with a rationale for learning the target grammar elements in keeping with the tenets of a task-based approach. Subsequently, learners are provided with the time to develop and test hypotheses about the selected feature of the target language. Finally, learners are encouraged to incorporate their newly acquired views on the language system in a productive and integrated way.

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